

Contracting for Design Services

February 1999

A scenario not worth repeating.

The customer blew into the designer's studio, tossed her bag on the table and declared, "It's been one of those days." The designer braced for the storm. The customer brought forth a mish-mash of papers—several drafts of a work in progress and a few sketchy charts. "Here," she said, "this is what we want you to work on, and we want it to look really spiffy. We need it printed, bound and delivered in two weeks."

The designer took a deep breath and knew exactly where to begin. "First, I need to know the scope of your project and the intended audience. A project history and a work plan would be helpful, too. Did you bring the details with you?" she asked.

The customer laughed nervously and said, "Are you kidding? I was told to bring it in and tell you to make it look pretty. We've been flying by the seats of our pants trying to get this thing out on time."

"Wrong answer," thought the designer, but instead she said, "I'm not sure that I can help you. From the look of things you still need a project manager, an editor and maybe an illustrator. And with such a tight turn-around, there are bound to be mistakes. Let's talk when you have more pieces to your puzzle in place."

How can you avoid this scenario and still meet a deadline when purchasing graphic design services?

- Treat the graphic designer as a professional. Don't ask a designer to make up for, or disguise, a lack of planning.
- Be clear about what you want and be realistic about how long it will take and how much it will cost.
- Develop a description of the project and a work plan.
- Do some homework about the production process. Working backwards from your deadline, leave enough time for each step in the process, including proofing and approval.

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On choosing a designer . . .

Graphic design covers a wide range of skills, from high-end advertising and information design to desktop publishing and layout. Professional designers can produce art for printed materials, packaging, displays and exhibits, logos and corporate identities, and digital media on the Internet. Designers can also serve as consultants or art directors. Their skill is knowing how to communicate and create visual impact in a variety of media. To make sure you get the right designer for your job, be prepared, know what to look for, and decide what you can afford.

1 Before you start

- Identify the audience for your project. Be specific. What do you want to communicate? In what style? What is the best way to reach them? This will help the designer suggest effective approaches.
- Gather some samples that are close to what you have in mind, including charts and illustrations you like.
- Estimate the length or complexity of the project. How many pages and pictures and charts? Will text and data be in different programs? Do you plan on putting it on a web site?
- Develop a ballpark budget for production and printing. Do this early. Designers charge \$50-100/hour. Expect to spend \$200-300 for a basic brochure and \$500-1000 for a typical document or display. Set a maximum, then discuss with the designer what you can get for that price. Many designers will have solutions you didn't think of and may be willing to negotiate.
- Will you need illustrations or photographs? How many? They are an additional cost. A simple illustration: \$150-300. A color illustration: \$500-1000 or more. Photographer: \$100-200/hour (not including models, materials and prints).
- Assign one person to communicate decisions and to be the contact for the designer.
- Avoid design by committee. This can be frustrating for both committee members and the designer, and it can drive up the cost. If committee approval is required, consider having the designer make a presentation of the product to the group to avoid miscommunication.

2 What to look for

Interview several designers and have them present their portfolios. Look for:

- Years of experience with the type of service you need.
- Examples of work that you find appealing and close to what you envision.
- Attention to detail and ability to work quickly.
- Personal integrity, flexibility, punctuality and articulateness.
- An overall sense of good taste in selection of materials, color, typography.
- An organized portfolio.
- Samples in different media, such as print, electronic, exhibits, web sites.
- Pieces that are aimed at a target audience.
- A résumé and references. Call the references.

3 Ask for estimates

Provide a clear description of your project that defines roles and responsibilities. Designers will use this for their estimates, and you can use it to keep the project on track. Be consistent about describing the project to all bidders.

Specify:

- Your deadline, and whether the designer will help you develop a work plan.
- The kind of equipment/platform and software that will work best for you.
- How many meetings the designer will need to attend.
- The approval process and how many rounds of corrections you anticipate.
- Whether you want the estimate to include charts, illustrations, photographs.
- What the designer will provide you with, such as files on disk, high-resolution camera-ready art, negatives, laser prints, a web page.
- Whether the estimate includes the cost of proof copies.
- If the designer will act as the art director and/or printing coordinator.
- Your terms on ownership of the artwork.

Note: Designs and photos produced for state and local governments are public domain and the agency owns them. Some designers and photographers will assume they retain ownership rights, requiring you to pay each time an image is reproduced. Let your designer or photographer know beforehand that your agency will be the sole owner of the artwork and prints. Put it in writing.

When you select a designer, consider quality, style, deadlines and rapport as well as cost. Use your work plan as an agreement on responsibilities and deadlines. Remember that changes or delays on your end will mean changes and delays in the production schedule, and may increase the final cost.

4 Steps in the design process

1. Meet with the designer and explain the project in detail. Better yet, include the designer in early development meetings. Provide samples.
2. The designer creates a “comprehensive” or rough mock up so you can see what the job will look like. You may want a color “comp” (for a poster, for example) or a sample of a typical page (for a longer document). The comp is what you show the committee for design approval.
3. Provide the designer with **final**, edited text and supporting graphic materials. It is critical (especially in longer documents) that the text be finalized, spell-checked, proof read, and not subject to major changes or rewrites. If you hand the designer draft text and then change it substantially, you are asking the designer to start over and you should expect to pay more.
4. The designer provides a draft copy so you can work out design details.
5. The designer provides a proof copy, incorporating changes from the draft. You are responsible for catching all mistakes and marking the copy for final corrections.
6. You may want one more proof to make sure all corrections were made and to use as a “dummy” (a final mock up with instructions for the printer).
7. The designer provides you with printing specifications and camera-ready art or negatives, or a final version on disk. **The camera-ready art should be perfect and require no more changes.**

Depending on the quality of printing you want, black and white laser prints may be adequate as camera-ready art. Ask the designer and printer for their recommendations.

For color offset printing, the designer will set up the art as “spot color separations” or “process color separations.” Color offset printing is very different from color laser prints or color copying. Color copying is fine for making just a few low-resolution copies. However, a color desktop printer is not adequate for producing camera-ready art for a job that involves hundreds or thousands of copies. Offset printing is the most economical way to print larger quantities.

Summary checklist

Ask the designer to:

- Give you a cost estimate based on your description of the project
- Agree on responsibilities and deadlines
- Attend important development meetings as needed
- Provide a “comp” and give a presentation of the design to you, your approval authority, or your committee
- Provide a draft copy
- Refine the draft and provide a proof copy
- Make corrections
- Provide a final corrected copy of the design
- Make a printer’s dummy (a black and white copy with printing instructions marked on it)
- Provide printing specifications (paper color and weight, ink colors, number of copies, final size, binding, packaging, and any other special instructions to the printer)

Design and Publishing Resources

Suggested Readings. Many good books are available on the principles of design. Visit local libraries and bookstores, or search the selections of your favorite on-line bookseller. Typographer and designer Robin Williams has written several excellent books for starters:

The Mac Is Not a Typewriter

Peachpit Press, November 1990. ISBN: 0938151312

The PC Is Not a Typewriter

Peachpit Press, November 1992. ISBN: 0938151312

The Non-Designer's Design Book: Design and Typographic Principles for the Visual Novice

Peachpit Press, August 1994. ISBN:1566091594

Beyond the Mac Is Not a Typewriter: More Typographic Insights and Secrets

Peachpit Press, January 1996. ISBN: 0201885980

Website Links. Lots of design and publishing information is available on the World Wide Web. Here are some sites which can introduce some of the important concepts and considerations. These sites are provided as examples only. Washington State Department of Health does not recommend or endorse them.

Publishing Primer—a glossary of terms for the electronic publishing, graphic arts and printing industries.

Rainwater Press: www.rainwater.com/glossary.html

Graphic Communications Business Practices—definitions of common practices of the printing trade.

National Association of Printers & Lithographers: www.napl.org/forum/blankets.html

Printing Papers—an introduction to the features, benefits and uses of different paper weights and finishes used in offset printing.

Georgia Pacific: www.gp.com/paper/print/index.html

Introduction to Digital Imaging—a simple, step-by-step explanation of the digital imaging process.

Digital Printing & Imaging Association: www.dpia.org/abc/index.html

Eco Strategies—an exploration of how design choices relate to the environment.

Partners in Design: www.pidseattle.com/designwatch.html